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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 003129

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/SINGH

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SAAD HARIRI PLAYS HARBALL WITH HIZBALLAH
AND ADVOCATES REGIME CHANGE IN SYRIA

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Ambassador Feltman and econoff on 27 September met with Saad Hariri to talk about his strategy during and following Ramadan. Hariri plans to renew dialogue with Hizballah at a lower level but will not meet with General Aoun to avoid alienating his moderate Christian allies. Hariri described his new regional initiative to put Lebanese Christians in touch with Gulf Arab leaders. He also urged a harder USG line on Syrian and Iran, arguing that regime change in Syria would weaken Iran, and that the Saudis and Egyptians are taking a harder line than ever on Iran. End summary.

PLANNING FOR POST-RAMADAN POLITICS AND PREVENTING STREET CONFRONTATIONS

2. (C) Just back from more than a week in Saudi Arabia, Hariri reported that he is reaching out to reinvigorate his popular base. He plans to receive and deliver strong speeches to over 20,000 people at his nightly Iftar dinners (each seating a thousand or more), reaching even more via video. He also described his Ramadan initiative to have Lebanese Christian leaders receive the Maronite Patriarch Sfeir's blessing to go to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to meet with leaders, as a way of bolstering the profile of March 14 Christians.

3. (C) After cutting off all contact with Hizballah after the July 12 kidnapping, Hariri also plans to restart talks with Hizballah intermediaries as well as Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri in the next few days. Hariri says he is prepared to play hardball with Hizballah, and will deliver a clear message about what he wants and expects. This includes full implementation of UNSC resolution 1701 and Hizballah's disarmament if Lebanon regains control of Shebaa farms. He believes Hizballah and Michel Aoun are incapable of toppling the government, but says he is ready to face them if they go down that path. If Hizballah will not give up its weapons after Shebaa becomes Lebanese, Hariri says he is prepared to call them traitors. Hizballah's real goals are supporting Iran and preventing a tribunal.

4. (C) The Future bloc has absolutely no contact with General Aoun these days. Answering the Ambassador's question, Hariri said that will not restart dialogue with

him. First, Hariri considers Aoun unimportant; second, Hariri said that meeting with Aoun would undermine his own Christian allies.

15. (C) Noting the dangers of the currently polarized political rhetoric, Ambassador Feltman suggested that Hariri pick a few truly national issues, such as something that the National Dialogue issued a decision on but was not able to resolve, and organize some new activity on it under the leadership of Berri, but with the participation of Aoun. This might defuse Aoun and get him involved in something constructive and help to convince Aounists that they don't need to fight for a "national unity" government. Hariri scoffed at Aoun's ability to mobilize protestors, arguing that past protests showed that he could not bring out significant numbers of protesters, unlike Hizballah. The "national unity government" initiative and Nasrallah's tough rhetoric during Iftar speeches are Hizballah's attempts to scare the March 14 forces and rally people to go to the streets.

"REGIME CHANGE IN SYRIA
WOULD WEAKEN IRAN"

16. (C) Responding to the second Brammertz report, Hariri's interpretation was, "Brammertz knows it all but won't tell yet." Hariri expressed surprise only at Brammertz's confidence in the investigation and at what he described as American determination to view Syria as "innocent until proven guilty."

17. (C) The US and EU are focusing too much on Iran and should focus more on Syria during Ramadan, Hariri opined. Since Iran needs Syria, more pressure on Syria will hurt

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Iran. Regime change in Syria would weaken Iran because Syria is Iran's hand in Lebanon, Iraq, and parts of Palestine. Iran has Hamas, Al-Qaida in some places, and Hizballah. The Saudis and Egyptians are no longer pro-Assad, and are now very tough with Iran and Syria. Hariri met with French President Chirac last month and believes that the EU might consider a tougher line on Iran. The other Arab nations, though, still prefer to punish Iran with sanctions.

COMMENT

18. (C) While Hariri is apparently going to renew his contact with Hizballah after a two-plus month suspension, we did not have the impression -- as some have argued -- that he's about to go over to the dark side. Hariri described Hizballah in harsh language and spoke of having to even the score after Nasrallah "screwed" him in July (when Nasrallah met with Hariri to talk for hours about economic development, only two days before the kidnapping operation that so undermined Lebanon's economic development). In the context of the overheated political atmosphere in Lebanon today, most Lebanese (with the notable exception of Michel Aoun) will exhale in relief if Hizballah and the Hariris meet.
FELTMAN